DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 458 RC 018 368

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TITLE The Amish Child and Teaching Composition.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb, 19130 Nelson-Parkman Rd., Garrettsville, OH 44231 ($5.50 postpaid).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Amish; Bilingual Education; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *English (Second Language); High Risk Students; Public Schools; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *Test Bias; Testing Problems; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Amish children are at a disadvantage in the rural public school because of their unique traditional upbringing and multilingual society. One of the greatest areas of risk is language arts. This document provides resources and instructional tips for teachers teaching writing to Amish children in rural elementary schools. The Amish are a linguistic, cultural, and religious minority all at the same time. Little research and information are available to public schools to help them meet the special needs of these children. These three types of minority status coupled with rural culture factors may produce invalid results on standardized tests. Eight steps are listed by which the teacher can reduce bias against Amish children, including development of cultural awareness, evaluation of the validity of standardized tests, and use of more appropriate student evaluation methods. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students need not be proficient in speaking it in order to learn to write in it. Five tips are offered to help teachers encourage the development of writing skills in ESL students. (SV)

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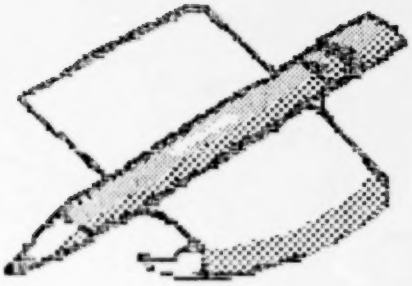
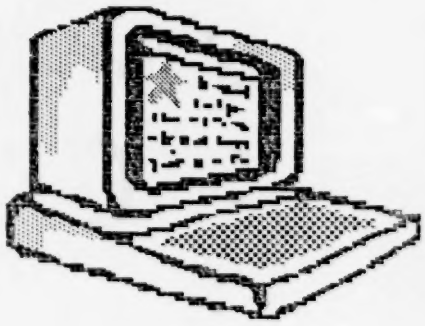


THE AMISH CHILD AND TEACHING COMPOSITION

DR. THOMAS L. NEWCOMB, PH.D.

1991



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THE AMISH CHILD AND TEACHING COMPOSITION

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Compiled 1991

Written as a resource guide for teachers teaching writing to Amish children in the elementary setting in rural schools.

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Dr. Newcomb is a teacher, writer and poet with many publications to his credit. He works at Mesopotamia School in Trumbull County, Ohio, where he operates writing and reading programs for students of many ages, including many Amish students. He is an award winning writer and a permanent member of the Assembly of Rural Teachers of English.

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A RURAL PEOPLE

The Amish are basically a rural people, descending from the Anabaptists of the Reformation Period. They are a group of related Christian churches. The entire population exists in North America with the majority of the people found in the United States. The Amish culture is a complex mixture of Biblical beliefs and traditional practices. The Amish world is substantially different from contemporary society. The Amish shun many common contemporary practices and conveniences. The Amish have many retrictions on lifestyle and are primarily a rural farming culture.

Because of their unique upbringing, somewhat sheltered from the outside world, and their multilingual society, Amish children often are placed at a disadvantage in the rural public school. One of the greatest areas of risk is the teaching of reading-language arts. Due to experiential background differences and being bilingual, Amish children often have trouble achieving to their potential in these areas.

UNIQUE NEEDS

Two major factors may inhibit rural public schools from meeting the needs of Amish children at risk in their populations.

*The Amish are a linguistic, cultural, and religious minoirty all at the same time. They do not fit the usual models as bilingual or minoirty students. There is a lack of basic understanding or respresentation of the Amish as models for at-risk programs. Schools, curriculums and publishers rarely treat the Amish in their texts or instructional considerations.

*Since they are a very small and unique minority, public schools are often uninformed of the Amish culture, and are hesitant to identiy Amish children as special needs pupils. Little research or information is available to public schools about the Amish culture or dealing with the backgrounds and needs of Amish children.

BIAS IN TESTING-EVALUATION

The rural life experience is believed to influence student performance on standardized tests. If GENERAL bias is present, how much greater is the bias to AMISH pupils who are a cultural minority in the rural setting? Laurece Hilton has presented evidence that rural cultural bias exists in public school testing (Hilton, 1991). He has suggested the following:

"If bias is present, validity is not. Validity refers to the appropriateness of the interpretation of the results of a test or evaluative instrument, NOT to the instrument itelf. Evidence is coming to light that rural life experience and culture may lead to questionable test results from rural children on some standardized tests. It is believed that rural and suburban cultures lead to significant differences in test profiles on some standardized tests. Rural cultural bias in speech and language assessment is as real as the bias previously documented as a function of socioeconomic

class, bilingualism or race."

It is apparent that rural factors plus the other factors of race (Germanic religious sect), socioeconomic class (small farmers), and bilingualism (three language culture) all may influence the performance of Amish students on public school tests and measures in a way radically different from other minority groups.

REDUCING THE BIAS

The following steps may help to reduce bias toward Amish children presnt in many rural schools and in many evaluative settings:

1. Develop a cultural awareness inservice curriculum to increase knowledge and understanding of the unique culture background of the Amish for those who test, intervene and teach.

2. Purchase and use culture-free standardized tests or use tests with rural children included in the norming samples.

3. Develop local measures, or develop local norms for frequently used standardized tests.

4. Do complete item analyses to find specific problems on standardized tests or specific areas of need.

5. Rely heavily on the personal observations and feedback of test administrators, interveners and teachers to find possible areas of task or situational bias.

6. Modify testing or instruments to adjust tests to cover areas of bias or concern.

7. Modify the language used by examiners, and be accepting of the language differences used by the child.

8. Use expert judgement and observation, not psychometric criteria or inflexible scales to evaluate student performance.

*(references: Hilton, 1991; Newcomb 1989)

ESL WRITING INDICATIONS

Recent research (Hudelson, 1989) has indicated that English as a Second Language (ESL) students need not be proficient in speaking their second language in order to learn to write in it. Even beginning Amish children can learn a lot about writing in English, if given the correct guidance and opportunities. ESL writers can write English even as they learn it. Feedback from others and their responses to the writing of others can make substantiative changes in the ESL child's writing style and content.

1. Make time for writing on a regular daily basis. The more time for students to experiment and express, the more about the language the student learns.

2. Initially encourage the writer and do not place much emphasis on mistakes. Look at writing in the draft mode as work in progress. Provide much support and recognition. Foster a love and willingness to write. ESL children often will want to learn about their mistakers and correct their style and format on their own as they become more proficient.

3. Respond to writing by focusing on the message, meanings and context of the writing instead of the forms being used.

4. Be aware of the unique context and experiences the rural Amish child will bring to writing. Language, cultural and religious impact on the style and format of writing may be very apparent.

5. Purpose is important to ESL writers. They need to be writing for reasons that are real and important to them.

*(reference: Ohio Bilingual-Multicultural Update, Sept. 1991)

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